

Against the Grain

Volume 22 | Issue 1

Article 39

February 2010

International Dateline -- Books for All: from Blyton's Secret Seven to Wittgenstein's Investigations

Rita Ricketts

Blackwell's, Rita.Ricketts@ouls.ox.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ricketts, Rita (2010) "International Dateline -- Books for All: from Blyton's Secret Seven to Wittgenstein's Investigations," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 39.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5869>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

International Dateline — Books for All: from Blyton's Secret Seven to Wittgenstein's Investigations

by **Rita Ricketts** (Blackwell's Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Author *Adventurers All, Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk*) <Rita.Ricketts@ouls.ox.ac.uk>

*"I take it that we all agree that books are the best presents...that very quality of permanence"*¹

Introduction

In the last episode we followed the magnificent but short life of the **Shakespeare Head Press**. Parting with anything to do with **Shakespeare Head** was, for **Basil Blackwell**, very painful: it had prompted many new adventures in publishing and its "beautifully produced books, had wetted the public's appetite for 'finer fare.'" For the years following the Great Depression, the machines at **Shakespeare Head** would have lain idle had it not been for **Basil's** determination to further expand the readership of the general public, especially the young. Thus the **SHP** name was preserved in the guise of children's books; which included works by **Enid Blyton**. This was not motivated simply by profit, although this was a necessary ingredient in the longer-run, but by a passion for widening educational opportunity bred in him by his self-educated and high-minded Victorian father; who in turn had inherited it from his mother and father: the first "Oxford" **Blackwells**. Through the medium of books, they were "bold to demand a standing...for the improvement of man, physically, socially, morally and intellectually."² It is an illustration of the **Blackwell** paradox: they were "entrepreneurs," and committed to private enterprise, but their life's work was dedicated to improving the lot of the individual while promoting the general good. In this instalment we follow **Basil** as he sets out to review the entire publishing scene in the United Kingdom; his ambition was to fill the gaps with quality publications from his own House. In time this dream materialised: **Basil Blackwell** lived to see his firm become a world-renowned academic and scientific publisher.

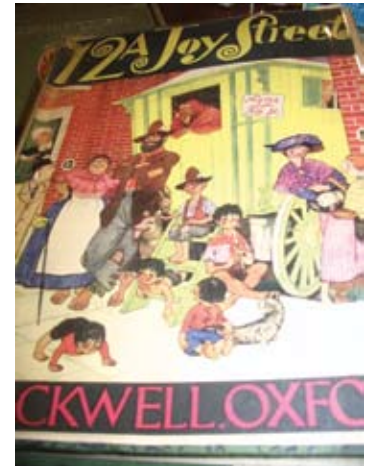
"We Are Bold to Demand a Standing for the Improvement of Man, Physically, Socially, Morally and Intellectually"

Basil's adventures in poetry, belles lettres, the popular novel and "affordable" **SHP** classics, were already being rewarded with an avid readership; many of them newly literate. Taking heart from this, and being well-placed while serving a second term as the President of the **Booksellers' Association** in 1934, the still youthful **Basil** made it his crusade. Enlisting the help of **Sir Stanley Unwin**, **Basil** convened a conference devoted to "the new book market." The blessing of **Stanley Unwin**, a much tougher operator than **Basil** who favoured an incremental rather than inspirational approach, was a boon. He, like **Basil**, believed passionately that the book trade should be continually improved.³ Come the conference, hosted by **Basil**, an informal weekend attended by some fifty publishers and booksellers at Rippon Hall, Oxford, "the weather was wonderful." And this augured well; between the social interactions of this group of friends and acquaintances, they found time for serious talk. One of the delegates was a young man of 32, called **Allen Lane**. Encouraged by the deliberations of the weekend this young man



resolved to make his mark in the publishing world. In conversation with **Basil**, sitting under an appletree in the **Blackwell's** orchard at the family home (Osse Field), **Allen Lane's** ambition hardened. A year later, in 1935, he launched the imprint which was to

change the face of British and international publishing — **Penguin Books**. These brightly-coloured paperbacks, described as "intelligent books for intelligent people," sold for less than a packet of cigarettes. Within two years the first ten titles, including **Agatha Christie**, **Beverly Nichols**, and **Ernest Hemingway**, were supplemented with more heady fare, six paperback **Shakespeares** and the first **Pelican** entitled "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism."⁴ **Basil** claimed that his part in this piece was merely one of "a dumb sort of catalyst."⁵



Basil was never "dumb" but he was adept as a catalyst. Granted he didn't try to compete with the "big boys" in London, but he made enviable inroads in specialist markets. While **Penguin** made their way, **Basil**, determined to widen still further the ever-increasing circle of new readers, focused on books for children and schools. His father had taken some tentative and successful steps in this direction, coinciding as they did with the **Foster Education Act of 1870** which introduced compulsory elementary education. The devout **Benjamin Henry** was convinced of the importance for children of stories coming from the Christian tradition. His proudly produced *The Friend of Little Children*, told the story of the life of **Jesus**; it was introduced by the then Bishop of Liverpool and graced with coloured plates and the line drawings by the gifted illustrator **Charles T. Nightingale**. For small children he produced *Picture Tales from Russia*, published in 1914 before the Russian Revolution, with illustrations as exciting and vibrant as any of today's offerings for the very young. To expand this side **Benjamin Henry** enlisted the willing help of his son **Basil**, newly out of "publishing finishing school" at **OUP**. A shower of books resulted, for children of all ages, with new and original work by such doyens as **Eleanor Farjeon**, **Walter De La Mare**, **Laurence Housman**, **Hugh Chesterman**, **AA Milne**, **Hugh Walpole** and **Hilaire Belloc**, to name but a few. Of particular note were their contributions to the children's annual *Joy Street*, *A Medley of Verse for Boys and Girls* (1923). In line with his pursuit of fine printing, with the newly acquired **SHP**, the book set a similarly high standard. **Edith Sitwell**, too, featured with a series of poems, one shaped, albeit made palatable, by the First World War: *March For a Toy Soldier*; another offering was the, now, politically incorrect, but innocent, *Dirge for a Gollywog* who was much loved. And **Hilaire Belloc**, true to form, provided the cautionary tale of *Maria who made faces*. Also off the Press, in the early 20s, came a series of *Babe's book of verse*, *Farmyard Ditties*, *Nursery Lays* and *Boggarty Ballads*.

In the last years of his life, **Benjamin Henry** encouraged his son to publish *Poems Chosen*, for children. The series, instantly successful, was collected in one volume in 1925. The poems in this anthology were chosen by "ten thousand boys and girls." "Through an edition of *Poetry* an appeal was made to find out the poems which had given the highest delight, the deepest joy, to boys and girls." The invitation received the support of the entire educational Press and from teachers in every type of school: "public and private, primary and secondary, urban and rural... who placed at the disposal of the editors the wisdom and experience of years."⁶ Alongside the likes of **Shakespeare**, **Blake**, **Wordsworth**, **Keats**, **Longfellow**, the **Brownings** and **Tennyson**, the chosen poems included those by contemporary writers, many of whom had been en-

continued on page 79

International Dateline from page 78

couraged by **Benjamin Henry Blackwell** in the early days of his infant publishing house. Fortuitously, the *Fisher Education Act*, 1918, raised the school leaving age to fourteen and planned to expand tertiary education. **Basil** seized the moment to break into the market for "Elementary School books." **Basil** decided that first a little market research was called for. "What were the current books like?" he asked. "I was wholly ignorant. I visited a local Educational Supplier and spent £1 on an armful of them for examination. It was a shocking experience." He lamented that "the dominant consideration was one of cheapness, and to this were sacrificed the contents physical and intellectual." Reacting to this morass of "hack work, shoddily produced," **Basil** recalled that he thumped his desk and cried "only the best is good enough for these children!"⁷ But how was he to proceed?

Help was at hand for **Basil** from **Appleton**, a much-esteemed colleague, who introduced him to **E.H. Carter**, His Majesty's Inspector for Education. "He encouraged us to enter the field, and undertook to advise us," **Basil** recorded. "In publishing," **Basil** explained, "the idea is of the first importance: it must be right and apt," but who was the best man to make it a reality? "With this in mind I discussed the project with fellow Blackwellian, **Will Hunt**, who recommended an approach to **C. H. K. Marten**, a long-standing friend of **Blackwell's** and Lower Master of Eton, whose histories for public and grammar schools were outstandingly successful. I made the journey to Eton and opened my mind to him. He caught fire and so did the Headmaster, **Cyril Alington**, who gave him 'sabbatical leave' to set the work in motion." There were four volumes in the series, *Marten and Carter's Histories*, 1928. Their intention was "to explain the present by the past...and to set the British story in the general story of mankind. For boys and girls who will become citizens of a Commonwealth of nations scattered over the Seven Seas, all will agree that the study of history must not be confined to that of the British Isles' but starting with the ancient civilisations of the East and coming up to date. The authors, like **Basil** and echoing **Mary Coleridge**, hoped that their readers would acquire a life-long love of history:

*Egypt's might is tumbled down,...
Greece is fallen and Troy town,
Glorious Rome hath lost her crown,
Venice's pride is nought...
But the dreams their children dreamed...
These remain.*⁸

Basil remembered that the *Marten and Carter Histories*, "for a considerable period, were selling, at the rate of 1,000 per week. It was a good foundation on which to build an education list."⁹ **Blackwell's Mighty Men** Series, by **Eleanor Farjeon**, followed; volume 1 covered **Achilles** to **Julius Caesar**. **Farjeon** was at one with her publisher; her words were music to his ears: "...certain things we may

know to be true. But there are other things...tales, incidents and legends... which, if they are not as true as the facts, may have a still greater power...in waking the imagination of a very young child. And unless the child's imagination is awakened...what he gathers from his learning will only be the dried specimens from his teacher's collection and not the living flower he has smelt for himself."¹⁰ Hard on the heels of **Farjeon's** series came *A Short History of Mankind*, **H. G. Wells** and

E. H. Carter, 1925, an authorized version of **Wells's Short History of the World**. Its aim was no less lofty: "to awaken interest and to encourage further reading." In order to provide this "further reading," **Basil** commissioned a series that would be both a "friend to readers" and a "starter library." These *Readings* (1926) were selected by **Walter De La Mare** and **Thomas Quayle**. They constituted a "library" of books in the sense that young readers were introduced to a wide range of works from **Dickens**, **Charles Kingsley**, **George Eliot**, **Oliver Goldsmith**, **Elizabeth Gaskell**, **R. L. Stevenson** and **William Cowper** to **Conrad**, **Melville**, **Hardy**, **Bunyan**, and **Robert Southey** in just one volume and many more luminaries in the others. Unstoppable, **Basil** sought to further expand the educational side of things. This meant more staff. **Basil** set out to find someone of the calibre of the established master in the field, **J. M. Dent**. It was **Basil's** colleague **Appleton** who first introduced him to **Ernest Parker**, educational manager of **Collins**. Rumour had it that **Parker's** contract there was due for renewal; he didn't renew it. "I have no doubt," **Basil** wrote, "that we should have come to grief if he had."

New on the block at **Blackwell's**, **Parker** soon found his feet. He was a winner, and was rewarded with a directorship of the infant firm of **Basil Blackwell and Mott Ltd**. "It was one of the wisest and happiest decisions in my business life," **Basil** reported. "Recalling him," **Basil** reminisced, "the word *vibrant* was the first to spring to mind. He was voluble, cheerfully aggressive, endowed with a brilliant mind and, seemingly, complete self-assurance." Better still, he was an insider in the education world, he had been a teacher before joining **Collins**, and he had a teacher's nose. "Above all," **Basil** wrote, "his enthusiastic spirit drove him to make an immediate impact on any company he might meet; he must seek to dominate it by brilliant talk; he must always be scoring points. Often, an old teacher's trick, he would begin by shocking and then winning over those whom he encountered. He was not the easiest of colleagues, and occasionally I had to say 'C'est ça,' but our debt to him was immense." The children's annual *Joy Street* was his invention, and, **Basil** recounted, "he guided the somewhat indeterminate policy of the **Shakespeare Head Press** towards the series



of reprints of Eighteenth Century novelists and other profitable ventures. He combined a mind fertile in ideas with the genius of a superlatively successful salesman. After the death of his beloved wife, who kept her rare beauty well into middle age, **Ernest Parker** said "the word is to carry on sergeant" and so he did for a year and then collapsed. For two years we did our best to restore him, but the stern fact emerged that his vibrancy and urge to dominate were prompted by an extreme

sense of insecurity. The force of his will had snapped and he lost even the management of such automatic actions as walking or the use of knife or fork. He began to make attempts on his life and at last succeeded."

Basil hailed **Parker** "as the driving spirit behind **Blackwell and Mott's** educational ventures." **Adrian Mott** recounted that "only once did I know him diverted from his purpose: 'when I found him with a young and particularly beautiful authoress, her arms around his neck, brazenly wheedling an extra ten per cent royalty out of him.'" But inspiration and driving spirit do not alone make for a successful publishing house. When **Ernest Parker** died in 1933, **Henry Schollick**, a newcomer enlisted only a year before, was appointed to replace him as a director of **Blackwell and Mott**. "Whereas **Parker** had infused the infant business with his inspirations," **Basil** explained, "**Henry Schollick** was more of an engineer: a builder who could develop the publishing side." Like many of **Basil's** recruits, **Henry Lightbrown Schollick** had made his own way; he had won a scholarship to his local grammar school and then a place to study PPE "at the small, but beautiful, **Oriel College**," Oxford. How different this must have been for the young **Henry**, as compared with his home in Blackburn, Lancashire?" **Basil** counted it a lucky day when the redoubtable *Heat Light and Sound* (**Schollick**), or "Uncle Henry" as he became, started on three-month probation. **Sir Adrian Mott**, too, had recorded his impressions of the inimitable **Henry Schollick**. "To get **Henry** was an extraordinary piece of luck for the firm. His rugged exterior — slightly reminiscent of **Rocky Marciano** — hides a heart of gold. With his giant brain and his infinite capacity for the evasion of Income Tax he had done more than anyone else except the chairman for the prosperity of the firm."¹¹

Schollick caught the **Blackwell** bug from **Basil** and his partner **Adrian Mott**, and as he travelled the country in a Vintage Austin Seven, from which he displayed **Blackwell's** wares, he made the firm many friends. Looking back, **Sir Basil**, at the age of eighty, was still excited by the memory of the Twenties and Thirties: "stirring times in the organisation of the book trade...and one with a foot in each camp (bookselling and publishing) deemed to have

continued on page 80

something useful to contribute.” **Basil** though, was a team player. His ambitions were inclusive. He was an enthusiastic member of the **Society of Bookmen**, **Hugh Walpole’s** innovation, and the **National Book Council**, **Unwin’s** brainchild. Such contacts provided “days out” to London for **Basil**, and late nights back on what was, jokingly, called “the fornicator’s express.” These halcyon days were, temporarily, interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, when **B & M** was seventeen years old. Inevitably the War brought change, **Basil** wrote, “and some things were sacrificed.” To his deep and everlasting regret, it had put the brakes on fine printing, and poetry offerings were dwindling. **Basil** commented ironically that “somehow the poets who had been so vocal about the Civil War in Spain became strangely silent when the really big one started.” More worryingly, opportunities had dried up on the bread and butter front of schoolbook publishing, too. In its wisdom, the **London County Council**, a very important customer, stopped buying books at the outbreak of war. Their schools had all been evacuated; there was, at the outset, no compensating increase in sales elsewhere, and turnover fell by a third. **Basil** recalled that “it survived...and fared no worse than others specialising in educational titles: badly at first, remarkably well thereafter.”

In September 1940, the future had looked so gloomy that it did not seem a great disaster to the Directors when, on September 27, German bombs destroyed all **B & M’s** unbound stock of school and children’s books. The loss was, after all, partly covered by the (compulsory) War Risks Insurance scheme, and they congratulated themselves further on being able to offset some of the rest by selling the sheets of slow-moving books, warehoused elsewhere, at 2d a pound for wrapping purposes! It seemed a sensible decision at the time, but they soon lived to regret it. And they were not the only publishers to read the omens wrong. **Oxford University Press**, for example, well provided as it was with slow sellers, happily pulped “surplus” stocks of many books that would have sold fast in the future. Its mandarins, in their wisdom, even proposed to reduce the enormous unbound stock of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “but an Air Raid Warden demonstrated that the tons of sheets, formed into a hollow square, made an exceptionally secure Wardens’ Post in the Jordan Hill warehouse in North Oxford, and the *Dictionary* was reprieved.” **Black-**

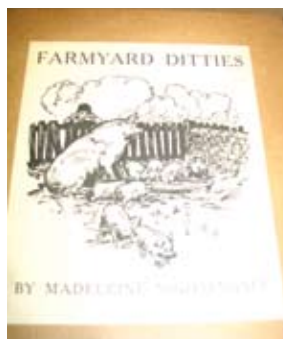
well’s reprieve was in large part due to **Henry Schollick’s** good husbandry, and “subtle devices”; **Blackwell** publishing emerged the stronger from the wartime period, with a turnover nearly twice as large as before the war. It is an irony that someone who

so hated the war as much as **Basil**, would keep a file on the horrors of the concentration camps and the conditions facing POWs. And that his firm should profit by the war!

Basil’s attributed his firm’s profitability to the expansion of demand for books, to the forces of social and political change. “Two devastating wars, coinciding with the growth of universal education, had had a civilising effect. People were not content to be merely cannon fodder: they were more critical, better informed, and, at all levels of Society, more aware of their rights, as well as their obligations,” he insisted. **Locke** had finally won the argument with **Hobbes**: rational man had prevailed over the state of nature. **Basil** had nailed his colours to the mast with the publication of a selection of essays, *Peace Talks for Schools* (1920), by **J. H. Badley**, classical scholar and headmaster of **Bedales School**, who, like the **Blackwell** men, was an enthusiast for the **Workers Education Association**. Through education “we hope to see rise from the ruins of war...greater intelligence and powers more highly trained.”¹² On a more pragmatic level, the War had clearly shown **Basil** that there was the need for more and better scientific research in all areas from physics to electronics and medical science and for its publication. He turned then, with the help of **Henry Schollick**, to developing the “seriously academic” side of publishing, extending the range of **Blackwell’s** publishing, in 1939, to cover scientific works. “Here was an endeavour that may have seemed presumptuous, being undertaken as it must in the very shadow of the largest and most learned publishing house in the world — **Oxford University Press**... If **David** were not to slay **Goliath**, but to live in prosperity with him, how might it be done?” **Basil** asked. Outside, blessed, intervention came when, after the fall of France, in 1940, it became impossible for the universities to import European books and this provided “an entry into the select preserve of the set books formerly produced by the university presses.”

The academic side of **Blackwell’s** was a venture that was to go on bearing useful fruit to this day. It included coups of the magnitude as the one pulled off by **Henry Schollick**, when he had the foresight to secure the world rights for the posthumous publication of the works of **Ludwig Wittgenstein**.¹³ **Basil Blackwell**

admitted to no surprise: “this went hand in glove with our main bookshop activity in serving the needs of scholars and scholarly librarians the world over.”¹⁴ Such a ready market of authors and students had existed from the early days at **Blackwell’s** when former **Oxford** graduates went out to



serve as professors, lecturers and librarians and, remembering their happy times at **Blackwell’s**, relied on the connection to get their books published and to furnish their shelves. Catalogues from **B. H. Blackwell**, bookseller, had found their way to the US as early as 1846, as did those of his son from 1879, and by the beginning of the 20th century Empire and Rhodes scholars started coming to Oxford.

They too had carried back, especially to the United States, “an affection for the Firm which expressed itself in their seeking to obtain from us their needs in books.”¹⁵ And so began a long and happy connection between **Blackwell’s** and the academic world in America and the Commonwealth, a link which is still as strong today; demonstrable at international conferences, such as Charleston. Tied and committed as he was to **Oxford**, **Basil Blackwell** claimed that his own contribution to this world was limited and modest in scope. But then “there comes a side to **Sir Basil** which he kept dark, and deserves a bright light shone on it...his capacity as a writer — and not only of tactful letters,” **John Betjeman** announced at **Basil’s** 70th birthday.¹⁶ Like his father, **Basil** was a frustrated writer, who knew only too well how difficult it was to make a mark. His father had written local travel guides and **Basil** published poetry from a young age. The next instalment will reveal something of **Basil** as a writer. But even this was a means to a publishing end. By telling writers’ stories **Basil** sought to help those whose contributions would otherwise remain obscure. 🌿

Endnotes

1. *Merton Blackwell Collection*, BLK/3/6 articles/notes by **Basil Blackwell**.
2. **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All*, Blackwell’s, Oxford, 2002.
3. **Philip Unwin**, draft speech for the **Society of Bookmen**, 1971.
4. *Oxford Times*, 6.9.1985.
5. **Blackwell’s** centenary issue.
6. *Poems Chosen for Boys and Girls*, arranged by **Fowler Wright** and **Crompton Rhodes**, **Basil Blackwell**, Oxford, 1925. The first volume came out in 1923.
7. See **Basil Blackwell’s** own notes, May 1956 and 6 September 1979.
8. **Mary Coleridge**, *Poems* no 121, 1907.
9. Op cit, **Basil Blackwell**, May 1956, 1963 and 1979.
10. **Eleanor Farjeon**, *Mighty Men*, **Basil Blackwell**, 1924, p v.
11. **Sir Adrian Mott**, hand-written notes found, by his wife, after his death, in preparation of a speech on the history of **B & M**, October 5 1954, he was then sixty-five.
12. **J. H. Badley**, *Peace Talks in Peace and War*, **Basil Blackwell**, Oxford 1920 p 111
13. Notes on publishing, **Basil Blackwell**.
14. **Basil Blackwell’s** own notes.
15. *Ibid*.
16. *Merton Blackwell Collection*, BLK/3/9.

